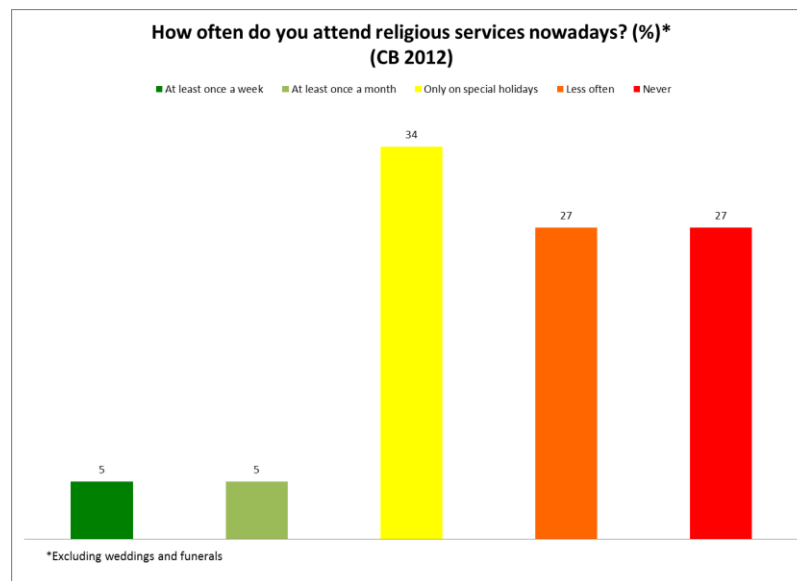


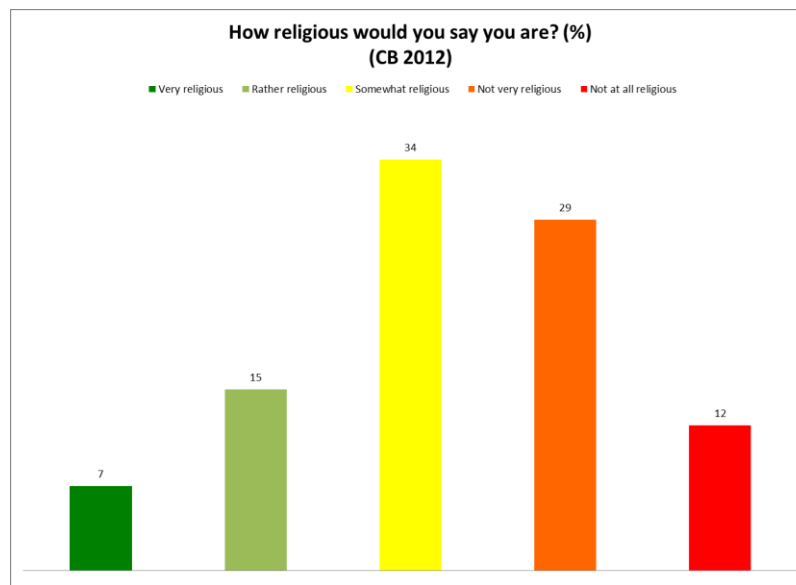
Islam in Azerbaijan: A Sectarian Approach to Measuring Religiosity

Azerbaijan is arguably one of the most secular countries in the Muslim world. Nearly seven decades of official atheist policy as part of the Soviet Union, along with isolation from the rest of the non-Soviet Muslim world, diminished Islam's position in the country. According to many, including [Haji Shahin Hasanli](#), a prominent and respected voice among Azerbaijan's Shia population and akhund (Muslim cleric) of the popular Meshedi Dadash Mosque in Baku, today many Azerbaijanis have little knowledge of Islamic tenets and practices even after two decades of independence. However, accurately gauging the number of committed believers in Azerbaijan presents challenges, given that religiosity as measured by Azerbaijanis' religious knowledge, practice, and belief varies quite drastically. This blog suggests that Azerbaijanis' sectarian preferences may provide a reliable measure of religiosity.

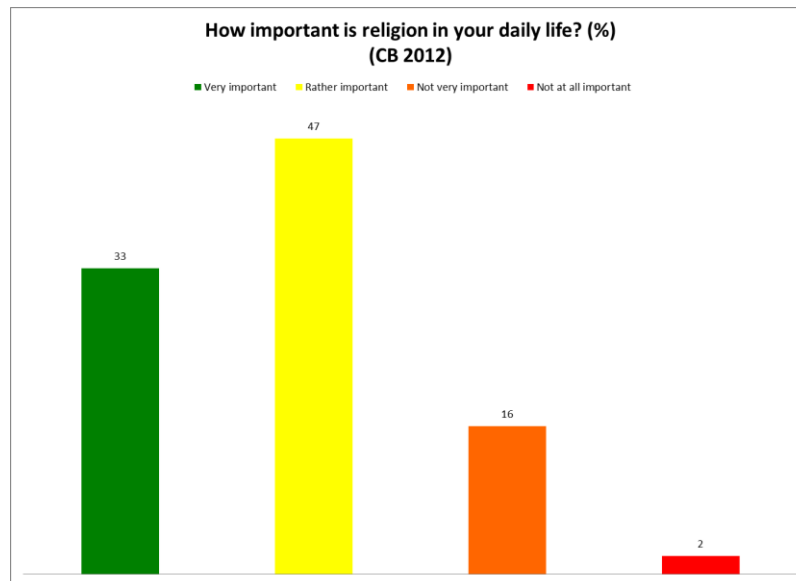
Religiosity can entail "institutionalized" and "subjective" modes of religious involvement (Dittes 1971); the corresponding measures of these modes in Azerbaijan elicit very different results. According to data from CRRC's [2012 Caucasus Barometer](#) (CB), Azerbaijanis' active (i.e. institutionalized) religiosity as measured by mosque attendance and fasting is quite low. Only 10% of Azerbaijanis claimed to attend religious services either on a weekly or monthly basis, while 34% indicated attendance on special holidays and 54% attended "less often" or "never". Similarly, only 16% stated that they "always" or "often" fasted when required by religious traditions, whereas an overwhelming 69% claimed "rarely" or "never" to fast.



More subjective measures, on the other hand, seem to indicate greater religiosity. Accordingly, over 20% of Azerbaijanis claimed to be "very" or "rather" religious, while 34% indicated they were "somewhat" religious and 41% "not very" or "not at all" religious.



When asked about the importance of religion in their daily lives, however, a remarkable 80% of Azerbaijanis indicated that religion played a "very" or "rather" important role in their lives, while less than 20% stated that religion was "not very" or "not at all" important.

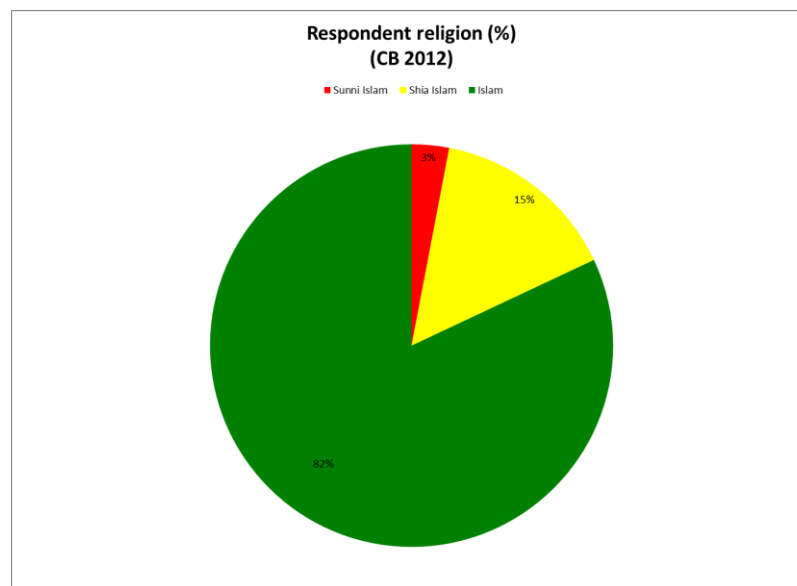


Reconciling these measures is problematic for several reasons. First, indicators of attendance religious services may in fact underestimate the number of committed believers in Azerbaijan. Some argue that Azerbaijan's official Muslim clergy, for example, has a reputation for low levels of religious knowledge (see [Yunus 2012](#): 18-21), a fact which may discourage many believers from engaging in collective, institutionalized religious practices in preference for prayer at home. Moreover, attendance measures do not take into account the practice of visiting Muslim shrines, which is widespread in Azerbaijan and represents another form--albeit informal and folkloric--of religious expression.

On the other hand, that Islam "plays an important role" in 80% of respondents' lives presents a vast contrast to the 10% who regularly attend religious services, suggesting that Azerbaijanis may have a

stronger *subjective* attachment to Islam, even if active religious observation remains weak. A more cohesive measure of religiosity--one that reconciles institutionalized and subjective modes of involvement--may lie in Azerbaijanis' sectarian preferences.

By many accounts, Azerbaijan's [Muslim population](#) is approximately 65% Shia and 35% Sunni. While this figure may correspond to historical sectarian trends and thus hold true in a very normative sense, CB 2012 data indicate that over 80% of Azerbaijanis actually did not specify a sectarian preference when asked to which religion they adhered. Instead they simply referred to their religion as "Islam", thus indicating that their primary religious identification may not be based on sect. Out of the remaining 18%, 15% of Azerbaijanis claimed to be Shia, while 3% claimed to be Sunni.



A clear confessional stance may indicate who actually considers himself/herself to be a committed believer, given that sectarian affiliation entails observance of particular institutionalized and subjective modes of religious involvement. Institutionally speaking, Shias and Sunnis have a number of divergent practices, especially regarding namaz (prayer) traditions; and subjectively, Shias venerate the institution of the Imamate with regards to Muhammad's successor, whereas Sunnis view the non-divine Caliphate as the legitimate mechanism of succession.

Thus, clarifying one's confessional preference involves a conscious recognition of the tenets and practices most strongly associated with one's confession. In other words, it is above all committed believers--that 18%--who have a clear motivation to clarify their sectarian preference.